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ABSTRACT

In the history of small group studies (in the field of communication theory and research), two factors contributed to the changes that led to Ernest Bormann publishing in 1970 his work questioning the value of the knowledge being reported and the appropriateness of the methods by which it was being generated. First, prior to 1965, a limited amount of the scholarship about groups produced in communication studies would qualify as research. Second, the few scholars actually doing research more often than not modeled their inquiries on work in social psychology and sociology. The year 1964 marked the beginning of a new emphasis on the characteristics of communicative exchanges. Research on communication in groups during the 1970s and 1980s has focused on several concerns that include: (1) decision making; (2) reactions to deviant behavior; (3) reticence and communication apprehension; (4) consciousness-raising; (5) risk-taking/choice shift/polarization; (6) personality characteristics of group members; (7) communicative characteristics of different types of group participants; (8) creative problem solving; and (9) gender/communication relationships. In the area of decision making, despite the limitations of research on communication in groups, impressive progress has been made in the last 25 years. Inquiry has moved out of a more or less exploratory, unfocused mode and now exhibits a theoretically grounded orientation, with communication as the central concern. Premonitions are for a bright rather than dismal future. (One hundred and ten references are appended.) (MS)

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REMEMBERING 1970, AND PREMONITIONS ABOUT 2000

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REMEMBERING 1970, AND PREMONITIONS ABOUT 2000

Dennis S. Gouran

The year 1970 has special significance in the history of small group studies, at least within the field of communication theory and research. It was in that year that Ernest Bormann published his oft cited critique questioning the value of the knowledge being reported and the appropriateness of the methods by which it was being generated. Although Bormann appeared in fact to be indicting a research tradition that was not unique to small group research, his essay led to a great deal of discussion, further critiques, and efforts to bring sharper focus, as well as clear direction, to this particular area of study (see, for example, Gouran, 1970; 1973; Larson, 1971; Mortensen, 1970). Particularly disturbing to these critics were the lack of attention to discussion content and the absence of solid--in Bormann's view, even appropriate--theoretical foundations for the sorts of questions being asked and the occasional hypotheses being tested.

That such observations arose was almost inevitable in light of two factors. First, prior to 1965, a limited amount of the scholarship about groups produced in communication would qualify as research (see Gouran, 1985). Most of those writing about group process did so from a pedagogical perspective. Hence, there was not much information to synthesize or to integrate within any theoretical framework. Second, the few scholars actually doing research more often than not modeled their inquiries on work in social psychology and sociology (see, for example, studies by Crowell, Katcher, & Myamoto, 1955; Harnack, 1951, 1955; Johnson, 1943; Pyron, 1964; Pyron & Sharp, 1963; Sharp &

Milliken, 1964). Even with the important work of Robert F. Bales (1950) on interaction analysis, specific characteristics of discussion content were typically of limited interest in these fields as were theories of group process. Consequently, in choosing work in social psychology and sociology as the model, communication scholars exhibited little inclination to deal with issues central to understanding the role of communication in the types of groups they studied. A notable exception was Edwin Black (1955), who examined interaction sequences in decision-making discussions from a rhetorical perspective to determine the causes of breakdown. Otherwise, for the most part, investigations up to the mid-1960s dealt primarily with personal and contextual variables. Studies were largely derivative rather than originative.

The year 1964 marked the beginning of a new emphasis on the characteristics of communicative exchanges in decision-making and problem-solving groups with the publication of a landmark study on idea development by Scheidel and Crowell (1964). This was followed by research examining sequences of feedback (Scheidel & Crowell, 1966) as well as studies by Geier (1967) on the communicative traits of leaders in task-oriented groups and Berg (1967) on the thematic development of discussion content.

The emphasis on communication evident in this small body of emergent scholarship was reinforced by participants at the Speech Association of America Conference on defining the field held in New Orleans (see Kibler & Barker, 1969). Conferees took the position that the Speech Communication should consider its legitimate domain "the ways in which messages link participants during interactions" (p. 33). The

move toward aspects of communicative behavior as a focus of inquiry continued with the publication of articles by Gouran (1969) and Fisher (1970a) who both examined the communication/consensus relationship in decision-making groups--albeit from quite different perspectives. Whereas Fisher sought to determine how consensus is reached, Gouran attempted to distinguish groups achieving consensus from those failing to do in terms of specific communication variables. At the same time, Leathers (1969, 1970) was doing work on the ways in which particular types of utterances affect subsequent patterns of interaction.

By the time most of the previously mentioned critiques appeared, then, the concern about more intensive investigation of communicative behavior had been addressed in limited ways by several different scholars. The paucity of theoretically grounded inquiry was to remain a problem for some time to come, however.

Between 1970 and 1978, according to Cragan and Wright (1980), 114 studies dealing with groups were published in communication journals. Although a majority of these dealt with task-oriented groups, a substantial number did not. Cragan and Wright found a basis for classifying the studies in their sample in terms of whether they continued traditional lines of research or introduced new ones. Within the category of "traditional lines," they saw three groups: "leadership, discussion methods, and pedagogy" (p. 200). The so-called "new lines" were designated as "communication variables affecting group outcomes, process of communication in groups, and communication variables studied in groups" (pp. 200-201). The last category consisted of investigations involving factors, some of which are themselves

communication variables, that affect the content of group participants' utterances.

Sixty-four of the 114 published studies examined by Cragan and Wright represented "new lines," and all of these reflected attention to communicative behavior. The percentage of published reports having this emphasis seemed clearly to establish the trend initiated by Scheidel and Crowell (1964) and revealed that critics' voices had not fallen on deaf ears. Neither had the criticisms concerning the lack of theoretical grounding gone unheeded. However, in the latter regard, progress was neither rapid nor significant. At best, it could be considered only modest.

Fisher and Hawes (1971) took a grounded-theory perspective in the development of their "Interact System Model" and argued essentially that theory should derive from empirical observations of communication in groups and be constructed on the basis of the pattern and consistencies that occur. The model and its authors' injunctions about theory development spawned several studies (for example, Ellis, 1979; Ellis & Fisher, 1975; Fisher, 1970b; Mabry, 1975; Stech, 1975). In spite of the amount of research activity generated, theory development was slow, as scholars working in this area appeared to be more concerned--indeed preoccupied--with identifying the best category system and examining the assumptions underlying different methods of statistical analysis.

Gouran (1973) urged small group scholars to think in terms of a structure consisting of contexts, communication variables, and outcomes, and within which to locate particular sets of observed and hypothetical relationships. This structure presumably would enable researchers to begin conceiving propositions that constitute the sorts of clusters

entering into formal theories. The proposal had little impact on the generation of theory but may have had some utility as an organizational framework and for identifying the range of research questions that are possible.

Hampering the development of theory throughout the decade of the 1970s perhaps was the absence of consensus about the domain of questions and contexts to which such formulations should apply. Nevertheless, by the close of the decade, research on communication in decision-making groups was concentrating more and more on decision-making and began to show two general thrusts. Many studies within this domain exhibited concern either with the relationship of communication to decisional outcomes and responses to those outcomes or with communication as a process in which decisions and solutions to problems develop.

Those manifesting the first orientation saw decisions as final choices among sets of alternatives made by group members (for example, Bell, 1974; Kline, 1972; Knutson & Kowitz, 1977). These choices could vary in terms of such variables as the amount of agreement they elicit (Hill, 1976), satisfaction of group members (Jurma, 1978), and perceived quality (Gouran, Brown, & Henry, 1978). Scholars reflecting the second orientation saw decisions as ideas (proposals) undergoing continuous modification, accommodation, and development (for example, Ellis & Fisher, 1975; Fisher, 1979; Fisher, Drecksel, & Werbel, 1978). Decisions to the first group have properties and can be viewed as good or bad, correct or incorrect, of high quality or low quality, workable or unworkable, and the like. To the latter group, decisions are mutually negotiated agreements that fluctuate in their level of acceptability throughout the process in which they are created and as

such are lacking in objective properties. Outcome oriented scholars were concerned with how communication facilitates or interferes with a group's ability to satisfy the requisites of informed choice, whereas their process oriented counterparts wanted to discover how decisions are reached, independently of their particular merits.

As scholarship dealing with communication in decision-making groups moved into the 1980s, both groups of researchers began to find better theoretical grounding for their inquiries. This grounding came from developments in other disciplines, however. In the first case, influence was traceable to social and cognitive psychology. In the latter instance, sociology--particularly the work of Anthony Giddens (1976, 1977)--was a major source of influence.

In 1972, Irving Janis published his influential book Victims of Groupthink. This work proved to be the forerunner of a more systematic and theoretically oriented examination of decision making that he subsequently coauthored with Leon Mann (see Janis and Mann, 1977). Janis was concerned with the sources of effective and ineffective decision making in groups and did much to reinstate the notion that the manner in which both groups and individuals examine information in relation to choices available to them appreciably affects their ability to solve problems and to avoid adverse consequences. Although Janis and Mann (1977) denied that one can know at the moment of choice whether the "best" decision has been reached, they nevertheless maintained the likelihood that it has is directly related to conformity with specifiable procedures and decision-making practices.

The rationalistic perspective espoused by Janis (1972, 1982) and Janis and Mann (1977) was strongly reminiscent of the adaptations

teachers of discussion had made in John Dewey's (1910) description of the reflective thinking process (see, for example, Baird, 1927; Ewbank & Auer, 1941; McBurney & Hance, 1939). Janis and Mann's identification of "vigilance" and the set of procedures it suggests as the key to effective decision making is also quite similar to the conception of following the "standard agenda," about which Phillips (1966) had written many years earlier. The pedagogical use of rational models in speech communication had generated little, if any, research--an exception being a study by Bayless (1967) in which the outcomes of discussions adhering to an agenda based on the reflective thinking model were compared to those of discussions in which a single-item agenda was employed. Somewhat ironically, then, it was not until psychologists began examining rational models for their theoretical value that they began to influence communication research on groups in any significant way.

That rational models of decision making were gaining currency in the conduct of inquiry was evidenced by the number of investigations beginning to reflect such a perspective as early as the mid and late 1970s (see, for instance, Marr, 1974; Courtright, 1978) and well into the 1980s. Hirokawa (1982) attempted to determine the relationship of vigilance to consensus, decision quality, and participant satisfaction in decision-making groups. Vigilance represented a cluster of behaviors that were, for the most part, polar opposites of Janis's (1972) "symptoms of groupthink" and the behavioral instantiation of the steps in the Dewey (1910) reflective thinking sequence. In a similar inquiry, Hirokawa (1983) identified five functions derived from the characteristics of vigilance and sought to determine their correlation with expert ratings of solutions to a traffic problem. Undertaking a

descriptive analysis of communicative behavior, Hirokawa and Pace (1983) presented several reasons for differences in the effectiveness of groups whose decisions were independently evaluated by an expert in the subject matter on which participants' discussions had focused. Findings were generally supportive of the implications of Janis and Mann's notions concerning the role of vigilance in decision making.

Not all post 1970s research concerned with the effectiveness or quality of decisions reveals the influence of rational models (for example, Burleson, Levine, & Samter, 1984), nor have all studies conducted from a rationalistic perspective shown as strong an influence of the particular views of Janis and Janis and Mann as those above (see, for example, Gouran, 1984; Gouran, Hirokawa, & Martz, 1986). In addition, not all outcome oriented scholars have been especially interested in the quality or effectiveness of decisions. Some of the outcomes of interest have included the acceptability of a solution by an external audience (Harper & Askling, 1980), the severity of punishment recommended for socially proscribed behavior (Gouran, Ketrow, Spear, & Metzger, 1984; Gouran & Andrews, 1984), consensus (DeStephen, 1983; Pace, 1988), ideational output (Jablin, 1981), and choice shift (Cline & Cline, 1980; Mayer, 1985).

That studies focusing on outcomes other than the effectiveness or quality of decisions have not reflected a strongly rationalistic perspective should not be construed as meaning they are without theoretical grounding. Such studies have drawn on a variety of perspectives, such as attribution theory (for example, Alderton, 1980), consistency theory (for example, Gouran, Ketrow, Spear, & Metzger, 1984), and social comparison theory (for example, Mayer, 1985).

Moreover, some inquiries involving the effectiveness or quality of decisions reached by groups have shown a hybrid influence. Gouran, Hirokawa, and Martz (1986), for instance, found some utility in decision theory as articulated by Janis and Mann (1977), but also drew heavily on various aspects of theories of social cognition synthesized by Nisbett and Ross (1980).

In an effort to bring clearer focus to the study of communication in decision-making groups for those interested in the effectiveness and quality of decisional outcomes, Gouran (1986) adapted several features of Wyer and Carlston's (1979) model of person perception and pointed out several ways in which communication can function to shape erroneous collective inferences. The basic notion is that decisions reached by groups are no better than the inferences on which they are based. To the extent that communication contributes to erroneous, questionable, or otherwise indefensible inferences about matters under consideration, the members of a group are predisposed to make inappropriate choices.

The relationship Gouran hypothesized has been partially supported in studies by Mason (1984) and Martz (1986) with laboratory groups in which the appropriateness of decisions for a case study was independently determined. Gouran (1984, 1987) and Gouran, Hirokawa, and Martz (1986) also found evidence of communication's contributing to erroneous collective inferences in case studies of the Watergate conspiracy, the Challenger disaster, and the Meese Commission. Although no one in communication has as yet constructed a formal theory of the communication/inference/choice relationship, studies grounded in cognitive perspectives on inferential judgment are beginning to cohere within a common theoretical frame of reference and have provided a clear

basis for understanding differences in the outcomes achieved by effective and ineffective decision-making groups.

Among scholars concerned with decision development, research since 1980 has reflected a more direct influence of theory on inquiry and a greater effort to refine and modify theory than has been true among outcome oriented investigators. The latter group has tended to draw on theory selectively and primarily for its explanatory value. The difference, in part, may be attributable to the fact that those attempting to understand the development of decisions in groups are asking a more limited set of questions. More likely, however, is that they appear to agree on a set of assumptions about the generative mechanisms that give rise to interaction and what properties of utterances constrain the manner in which it unfolds.

Work on decision development had its origins in the previously mentioned study by Scheidel and Crowell (1964); however, prior to 1980, virtually no theory existed to account for the patterning and predictability of interaction sequences being reported in published research. In addition, inconsistencies across studies either generated little comment or were accounted for in terms of differences in the methodological approaches taken in individual investigations. With a rather devastating critique of this body of scholarship by Hewes (1979), research on decision development in groups began to take on a markedly theoretical character.

Theoretically grounded research on decision development was given impetus in a study by Poole (1981) and two subsequent essays (Poole, 1983a, 1983b) in which he formulated the propositional structure from which one can derive particular expectations about the process by which

members of groups arrive at given decisional states. Since the publication of Poole's original study, a number of others emanating from the structurational perspective have appeared (for example, McPhee & Seibold, 1981; Poole McPhee, & Seibold, 1982; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985; Seibold et al., 1981).

Common to research in the structurational mold is the notion that rules and resources that guide action (structures) are at the base of overt behavior, or social practices. Social practices and structures exert reciprocal influence; hence, as the rules and resources group members possess give rise to individual activity, that behavior, in turn, may lead to alterations in rules and resources. Structuration, then, is a process in which rules and resources are continuously produced and reproduced in conjunction with the practices to which they lead. Social practices, of necessity, are further constrained by environmental influences, which can also trigger alterations in the rules and resources that give rise to the actions of groups.

The structurational perspective has led to some significant contributions in our understanding of various aspects of decision making in groups, including differences in decision paths (Poole, 1981), interaction sequences (Poole & Doelger, 1986), the development and functions of argument (Seibold et al., 1981), communicative influence (Seibold & Meyers, 1986), and the probability of selecting particular decision alternatives (Poole, McPhee, & Seibold, 1982; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985).

In light of the number of different facets of the surface-level behavior of decision-making groups the structurational perspective appears to accommodate, scholars subscribing to it have taken strides

toward an integrative theory, or at least toward a limited number of potentially integrative theories. What the perspective has not yet stimulated is research accounting for differences in outcomes along dimensions in which many people are interested, that is, the quality, effectiveness, correctness, utility, etc. of decisions. Whether it will evolve to that level of sophistication remains to be determined.

Not everyone doing research on communication in groups during the 1970s and '80s, of course, has been particularly interested in decision making. Among the many concerns represented in scholarly literature are: reactions to deviant behavior (e.g., Alderton, 1980; Bradley, 1980; Valentine & Fisher, 1974); reticence [illegible] communication apprehension (e.g., Burgoon, 1976; Lustig & Grove, 1975; Sorenson & McCroskey, 1977); consciousness-raising (e.g., Chesebro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1974); risk-taking/choice shift/polarization (e.g., Alderton, 1982; Cline & Cline, 1980; Kellermann & Jarboe, 1987); personality characteristics of group members (e.g., Bochner & Bochner, 1972; Rosenfeld & Plax, 1976); communicative characteristics of different types of group participants (e.g., Lumsden et al., 1974; Sargent & Miller, 1971; Schultz, 1982); creative problem solving (e.g., Jablin, 1981; Jablin, Seibold, & Sorenson, 1977; Philipsen, Mulac, & Dietrich, 1979); and gender/communication relationships (e.g., Alderton & Jurma, 1982; Bunyi & Andrews, 1985; Mabry, 1985; Spillman, Spillman, & Reinking, 1984). Even when the interest has not been in decisional processes, however, in most instances, inquiries such as those referred to above have occurred within the context of the decision-making group. In addition, these studies often have had direct or indirect

implications for understanding the ways in which communication functions in decision-making groups.

Despite the limitations of research on communication in groups identified in this review, impressive progress in that portion dealing with decision making has been made in the past 25 years, and especially since 1980. Inquiry has moved out of a more or less exploratory, atheoretical, unfocused mode and now exhibits the influence of two reasonably clear, well-developed, and theoretically grounded orientations, with communication as the central concern of each. Researchers investigating the communication/outcome relationship have found a basis for attributing the quality or effectiveness of decisions to the ways in which information is processed and the role communication plays in a group's ability to make informed choices. Scholars interested in how decisions develop are currently being guided by a set of theoretical principles that appear to have utility for understanding many different aspects of communicative activity.

As to what the future holds, one can only guess. And to attempt dictate how it should unfold would undoubtedly be audacious. Even to describe one's premonitions carries the risk of being seriously in error. As Gerald Miller (1984) has so aptly observed, the directions research takes in a field of inquiry are determined at any given point by those doing it and the sorts of issues to which they are attracted, not by stipulations or predictions. Given the convergence of scholarship within the two orientations described and the demonstrated utility of the theoretical principles accompanying them, however, one has good reason for encouraging continuation along the lines that have evolved. Neither body of inquiry appears close to the exhaustion of its

potential, nor has either led to many direct tests of the propositions and assumptions in theories and theoretical premises on which it has drawn.

Sustained work within the two orientations that have emerged in this decade may eventually lead to further integration and ultimately a single, unified perspective in which the relationship between the process of decision development and the characteristics of decisions can be more systematically explored and understood. Gouran (1988) has made an initial attempt to link the study of decision development and decision outcomes in an essay introducing the concept of appropriateness of decisions as one to which other indices of effectiveness seem to be necessarily subordinate.

An appropriate decision is one the members of a group are obliged to make in light of their specific purposes, the inherent logical requirements of the task, and what the analysis of relevant information according to commonly agreed upon rules of evidence establishes. Within this definitional framework, one cannot examine decisions apart from the process in which they arise. Research emphasizing the role of single variables or even sets of variables (for example, the communicative behavior contributing to erroneous inferences) is probably inadequate to account for the variation in the appropriateness of the decisions groups reach. Consequently, an examination of the process by which the rules and resources (structures) underlying the communication (social practices) leading to particular choices, or that are involved in the evolution of decisions, are produced and reproduced may ultimately hold the key to understanding fully phenomena we can now only partially explain.

Whether or not future scholarship on communication in groups moves in the direction of a unified perspective or amalgam of the two that are presently evident, researchers in the area are perhaps well advised to focus more of their inquires on the behavior of extant groups. Too few of the studies generated in our discipline have been conducted in settings in which tasks have been consequential, either for the participants or external publics. The ecological validity of much of the research is therefore suspect. If the group situations we study do not matter, then one cannot have a great deal of confidence that the communicative behavior of those who participate in them closely resembles that occurring in situations in which the tasks performed are of importance. In the case of decision-making groups, history has provided many artifacts of significance and often records of the interactions involved in their production. Researchers might profit and contribute more reliable knowledge about the communicative behavior of groups by taking greater advantage of these resources.

One hopes that research in the future not ignore or neglect the personal, social, and environmental variables conceivably having a bearing on the interaction of the members of groups. Reading more recently published scholarship contributes to the perception that, in trying to distinguish communication research from research in other disciplines, some scholars may have discounted factors that can and do influence communicative behavior and, thereby, the way in which groups perform their tasks. The search for uniform patterns of interaction to account for the outcomes groups achieve is probably a futile one. Knowledge will progress more rapidly if scholars exert greater effort to

explain differences in outcomes by including non-communicative influences than is likely if they choose to dismiss or minimize their importance.

Finally, we should not overlook the need to detrmine how interaction in groups is affected by the intervention of communication technology, and microcomputers in particular. Some work has already been done in this area (see, for example, Beauclair, 1987; Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986). Most work to date, however, consists of descriptions of the potential uses of computer technology (e.g., DeSanctis & Gallupe, 1984; Huber, 1984). As more groups begin to engage in the sort of asynchronous communication that computer mediated activity often creates, we need to begin determining what other consequences follow.

In 1974, Ivan Steiner published an article entitled, "Whatever Happened to the Group in Social Psychology?" The essay seemed to herald the end of the so-called "Golden Age" of small group research and portended that as an area of inquiry it would not be resurrected. Scholars in communication, however, were at that very time establishing that the study of groups is viable and that many interesting avenues remain to be explored. Especially in the area of decision making does this appear to have been true. Not only has the amount of activity been generous, but in studies undertaken by representatives of the profession, as this review demonstrates, the advancement of knowledge has been increasingly systematic. As James Davis (1986) observed in his preface to Communication and Group Decision-Making, such work as the volume illustrates gives clear "cause for optimism" (p. 12). Whatever happened to the group in social psychology? At least one appropriate

answer is that it has become the object of sustained scholarly interest in our discipline, particularly among those seeking to bring clarity to the communicative process by which humans functioning in groups arrive at consequential choices. Such premonitions as I have, therefore, are for a bright rather than dismal future and a period in which our knowledge of communication in groups increases not only in volume, but in its coherence, reliability, and utility as well.

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